Disabled by Body or by Barriers? A Social Model of Disability Analysis in Jean Little's Selected Works

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Introduction

World literature, with its universal themes resonating across diverse cultures and societies, encompasses a vast literary landscape. One distinctive subcategory within this global tapestry is Canadian literature. Characterized by its dynamic exploration of diverse themes, Canadian literary works often shine a spotlight on the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups, contributing significantly to the global discourse on diversity and inclusion. This body of literature serves as a testament to the multifaceted nature of Canadian society, celebrating its rich mosaic of voices and stories that might otherwise remain unheard.

Canadian literature, shaped by the nation's unique cultural, historical, and geographical context, includes a wide array of literary forms, from novels and short stories to plays, poems, and essays. Exploring themes such as multiculturalism, identity, nature, the vast wilderness, immigration, Indigenous issues, and the nation's relationship with its colonial heritage, Canadian literature reflects the complex and evolving identity of Canada. In his book, *A History of Canadian Literature*, W. H. New makes the following observations about Canada and its history:

> In Canada they helped to shape the expectation of the new society and its patterns of expression. As the new nation expanded to occupy most of the northern half of North America, these perspectives altered. A history of literature in Canada is of necessity, then, a record not only of specific literary accomplishments over space and through time, but also an account of ways in which the shaping contexts also changed, and of the interconnections between context and language. (2)

Canadian literature effectively addresses a wide array of disability themes. The academic discipline of disability studies in Canadian literature scrutinizes the portrayal, experiences, and exploration of disability within the works of Canadian authors. It is a multidisciplinary field, drawing insights from disability studies, literature, cultural studies, and social sciences.

Jean Little

The late Canadian novelist Jean Little (1932–2020), is best known for her outstanding contributions to children's and young adult literature. Little's life journey itself was a testament of resilience and determination. Born with a serious sight impairment, Little overcame numerous obstacles to create a substantial body of work that had a profound impact on readers worldwide and the landscape of children's literature. Her ability to write using a talking computer demonstrates her dedication to her craft despite physical challenges. Her works have earned her numerous accolades and awards.

Jean Little's uniqueness as a writer can be attributed to several factors: her personal experiences, her skill in crafting believable characters and emotions, her commitment to addressing significant themes, and her sensitivity in portraying a range of situations, including disability, diversity, family dynamics, loss, friendship, and the challenges of adapting to new environments and languages. Catherine Carstairs and Sydney Kruth, in their article titled "Disability and Citizenship in the Life and Fiction of Jean Little," highlights some of the recurring themes in Little's works, such as her exploration of diversity, immigration, and the strong bond between humans and animals. This combination of comfort and thought-provocation has solidified Little's position as a beloved author in the realms of children's and young adult fiction.

As Jennifer Litton observes, "The world is disabling and needs to be fixed." This quote serves as a powerful preamble to the overarching theme of disability and the pressing need for change.

Thesis Statement

Despite advancements in awareness and accessibility through government policies, disability remains a universal and enduring issue shaped significantly by societal attitudes and inaccessible systems. This study delves into the selected works of Jean Little, an author with a disability, to shed light on the persistent challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. Offering insights from a social model of disability perspective, highlighting both the systemic barriers and societal attitudes, that continue to affect the lived experiences of people with disabilities in contemporary society and finding potential solutions.

Objectives

1. Extract narratives and glean profound insights on the multifaceted subject of disability embedded within Little's writings.
2. Delve into the representation and portrayal of inaccessible systems, discerning their impact on the experiences of individuals grappling with disabilities.
3. Examine education, as a pivotal factor, under scrutiny for its dual potential—both as an empowering force and as a potential perpetuator of barriers for those with disabilities.
4. Dissecting prevailing social attitudes, recognizing their profound influence on the lived realities and societal integration of individuals living with disabilities.

Research Parameters & Methodology

Primary Texts

This study critically examines six sequential works authored by Jean Little, comprising *Mine for Keeps*, *From Anna, Listen for the Singing*, *Spring Begins in March*,

Little By Little: A Writer's Education, and *Star Comes Out Within*. These interconnected books offer a sequential narrative that intricately explores the experiences of characters facing disability. Through a meticulous analysis of these sequential texts, this study aims to delve into the multifaceted portrayal of disability, illuminating the evolving themes of barriers, societal attitudes, and the pivotal role of education in the lives of individuals grappling with disabilities within Little's literary realm.

Methodology

For this study, adherence to the 8th edition of the "MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers" serves as a foundational guideline. The methodology employed is firmly rooted in the conceptual framework of disability theory, with particular emphasis on the Social Model of Disability. This theoretical framework, elucidated by scholars such as Mike Oliver and expanded upon by thinkers like Tom Shakespeare, has been drawn from various authoritative sources, including books and scholarly articles. Among these sources, *The Disability Studies Reader (Fifth Edition)* by Lennard J. Davis serves as a central pillar of theoretical underpinning. In addition to this seminal work, several other scholarly texts have been consulted to provide a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis.

Structure

The research is organized into five chapters. The introduction chapter provides an overview of Canadian Literature, disability studies, Jean Little's life, thesis statement, objectives, methodology, and the thesis structure. The subsequent three chapters delve into the core analysis, while the final chapter consolidating the conclusion besides arguments of the previous chapters, brings out the findings.

The second chapter offers a detailed analysis of Jean Little's novels, *Mine for Keeps* and *Spring Begins in March*, focusing on physical barriers faced by children and young adults with disabilities, especially through the lens of the protagonist Sally Copeland. Little's works

vividly depict the challenges of adaptation, independence, and societal acceptance confronted by individuals like Sally, illuminating the multifaceted obstacles within the social model of disability. Rachael Adams' insights on 'access' expand the understanding beyond physical entry, emphasizing the need for broader societal transformation to achieve genuine inclusion.Sally's story exemplifies the social model perspective, highlighting societal structures and prejudices as the primary barriers individuals face. Little's portrayal prompts critical examination of these obstacles, advocating for an urgent need to create an inclusive society. Moreover, the novels underscore the importance of social inclusion as a fundamental human right and advocate for dismantling discriminatory systems.

Sally's character challenges stereotypes, presenting a resilient and multifaceted individual, fostering a broader appreciation of the diverse capabilities individuals with disabilities, like Sally, bring to society. Jean Little's novels, through Sally's narrative, contribute significantly by shedding light on the experiences of children with disabilities from a social model perspective, urging readers to actively participate in creating a more inclusive society.

The third chapter delves into Jean Little's exploration of immigration, adaptation, social inclusion, and human relationships through Anna Solden in her novels, *From Anna* and *Listen for the Singing*, particularly within the context of education. These narratives vividly depict the challenges faced by Anna, a disabled character, and her family upon their migration from Germany to Canada, highlighting the impact of migration on the physical and mental well-being of disabled individuals, as discussed in the "Migration and Health" article. The study specifically aims to analyze Anna's experiences, familial dynamics, and the societal context, all within the framework of education.

Education, within the social model of disability, plays a pivotal role in addressing societal barriers and enhancing the quality of life for disabled individuals. Scholarly discourse, exemplified by Tom Shakespeare, emphasizes the benefits derived from increased opportunities in mainstream education and employment, paired with anti-discrimination legislation and accessible resources, for fostering a more inclusive society. However, the discussion of special education, as deliberated by Goodley and Lipsky/Gartner, showcases its advantages in catering to unique needs but raises concerns about academic attainment.

Jean Little's novels effectively tackle prejudice, language discrimination, and socio-cultural changes experienced by individuals with disabilities, with a particular focus on the role of education. Her writing style, noted by Beverley Brenna, centers on characters finding inner strength to overcome challenges. Little realistically portrays how internal and external support aids individuals with disabilities in navigating new environments and cultural adjustments, underscoring the importance of education in this adaptation process. Moreover, the novels highlight the manifold advantages of inclusion, signifying a shared responsibility between families and schools in understanding and meeting the needs of individuals like Anna Solden within educational settings.

The fourth chapter delves into Jean Little's personal experiences as a disabled individual, particularly focusing on the social and attitudinal barriers she faced throughout her life. Her autobiographical works, *Little By Little: A Writer's Education* and its sequel, *Stars Come Out Within*, offer detailed insights into her upbringing, educational journey, experiences within inclusive environments, medical examinations, immigration narrative, and persistent efforts towards achieving social inclusion. This exploration highlights the intricate interplay between personal narratives and societal attitudes and structures, underscoring the challenges faced by disabled individuals in navigating various spheres of life.

The analysis aims to illuminate how Jean Little's life serves as a prism through which societal barriers impacting individuals with disabilities are revealed. It underscores the significance of recognizing and addressing these barriers to foster a more inclusive society. Moreover, the understanding of disability has shifted significantly with the advent of the social model, emphasizing the role of societal structures, attitudes, and constraints in shaping the experiences of disabled individuals.

Scholarly insights from Elsayed Elshabrawy Ahmad Hassanein, Brett Smith, Andrea Bundon, and others highlight the challenges within inclusive education movements and societal oppression experienced by disabled individuals. They emphasize the importance of dismantling societal barriers for complete social inclusion. Additionally, Jean Little's authentic portrayal of societal phenomena in her works, characterized by simplicity and ordinary language, embeds her lived experiences seamlessly within children's literature, underscoring the significance of her literary contribution.

The final chapter encapsulates the exploration of disability and inclusion in literature, offering diverse perspectives that contribute significantly to societal inclusivity. It weaves together themes of diversity, the challenge to norms, and the cultivation of empathy, serving as a powerful means of empowerment for individuals with disabilities. Jean Little's novels stand out as a focal point within this narrative, illustrating how education serves as an empowering force while societal barriers hinder progress, and how assistive technology plays a pivotal role in fostering inclusion. These narratives underscore the pivotal importance of education, highlight the array of barriers faced, and stress the indispensable role of social integration, all working towards achieving normalization and breaking down barriers.

The study's findings bring into focus critical elements: the empowering influence of education, the myriad barriers confronted by individuals with disabilities, the substantial

impact of assistive technology, the significance of social integration, and the vision articulated by Little towards normalization. It recommends further research avenues, urging exploration of more of Little's works, examination of contemporaneous perspectives on disability and inclusion, identification and resolution of specific societal challenges, policy shaping for enhanced accessibility and education, and a deeper exploration of technology's role within the social model of disability. This comprehensive study reiterates the paramount importance of education and inclusion for children with disabilities, shedding light on prevailing societal barriers and advocating for sustained efforts towards nurturing a more inclusive society.

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1	Exploring the Right to Education Discourse: Little's Education as a Model for Inclusion	*Inclusive* E-ISSN: 2278-9758	Vol. II No. 22 pp. 418-429 July 2023	UGC CARE Group I
2	Disability and Inclusion with Reference to Sally	*Margins: A Journal of Literature and Culture* ISSN- 2250-0731	Vol. X11 Dec 2023	UGC CARE Group I